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Creating Student-Staffed Writing Centers, Grades 6-12

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Thoughts for College Writing Center Tutors and their Directors

Each spring, a slew of college tutors graduate and head off to teach in grades 6-12. Most of those tutors loved working at their college writing centers; yet, very few will start writing centers at their new schools. True, writing centers have not been a significant part of the k-12 landscape, but after the success of their post-secondary counterparts, perhaps they should be.

As a former high school English teacher and writing center director, I've heard countless arguments against having writing centers in secondary schools. Here are a few:

- Students aren't skilled at working with one another.
- It's the teacher's job to "correct" papers.
- What would I do as a teacher if I didn't take student papers home with me to correct?
- Teachers have enough to do without creating more duties.
- Our school doesn't have space for a writing center.
- We don't have people to staff a center.
- A writing center will cost too much money.

If you're a college writing center tutor or professional staffer, you probably have answers to some of the above. For example, you've witnessed students working with students, and you know first-hand that this approach does work. Indeed, those of us who have started secondary writing centers have found solutions to most, if not all of these arguments.

For a college tutor heading off to teach in grades 6-12, this article will offer a glimpse at starting a writing center at your future school. Much of this article comes from my new book, **A Guide to Creating Student-Staffed Writing Centers, Grades 6-12 (Peter Lang, 2006)**. In an effort to further promote secondary school writing centers, I urge post-secondary writing center directors to continue sharing writing center information with local school district personnel, create secondary school writing center certification programs for university students, and adopt one (or more) secondary schools, not unlike Stanford University's **Ravenswood Writes Program**. This partnership joins the **Stanford University College of Education** and **Stanford's Writing Center** in providing writing instruction support for three local high schools: East Palo Alto High School, Summit High School, and Hillsdale High School.

Teaching High School English Before the Writing Center

During the first year of my English teaching life, I carried stacks of papers

home to "correct," just as my own high school English teachers had. For hour upon hour, I penciled marginal notations and comma corrections. I drew long squiggly lines across the pages in an attempt to guide my young writers in reorganizing sentences, paragraphs, or entire papers. Many English teachers know the drill.

It didn't take long for me to realize a couple of truths about my technique: First, my single edit of 100—120 student papers, usually without an extended consultation, didn't parallel how my own editor worked with me as a writer. She didn't try to "correct" a piece; she conferred with me draft after draft after draft. She respected the process–that recursive dance that writers live–and nurtured mine.

Our handpicked group of writing center staffers represented a cross-section of the student body. However, these young people had one common trait: Other kids liked them.

With my students' papers, I tried to do it all in one fell swoop. Because of the number of students I worked with, and because I could not conceive of another way, I had an assembly-line approach and bled on their papers. As I look back now, I see that I mangled papers, left students confused, and ignored process. Even worse, I probably discouraged some student writers.

For my talented and self-assured writers–perhaps ten percent of my kids–these corrections were viewed as a fun challenge. However, for most of my students, those who lacked confidence in their writing and in so many other areas of their lives, my editorial carnage confounded and discouraged. As a result of my corrections these students "fixed" lower-order issues such as comma errors and misspellings, but when it came to real revision, it didn't happen in deep ways. How do I know? All I had to do was compare drafts side by side: the second-draft papers were cleaner and more technically correct, but as for focus and development–those higher-order writing issues–not much changed. In fact, for these kids my editorial scribbles probably made writing more mysterious and more difficult, if not plain misery.

And thus the second truth: I could not be the primary editor for my many student writers if I wanted them to produce a good deal of revised writing during the course of the school year. Clearly, I needed help.

Creating and Operating Our Writing Center

Prior to high school teaching, I taught College Writing 100 at a university and required all of my students to use the university's writing center. Near the end of my first year of teaching high school, I thought about that university writing center and the benefits it provided to my college students. That spring I visited a secondary school learning lab/writing center. I liked what I saw and knew that both my students and I needed this kind of support.

You'll read statistics claiming that ninety percent of high school students' time is devoted to listening to teachers talk...that reality changes when students work with students in a writing center.

During the first year of our writing center's operation, twelve students worked out of the back of my English classroom. A supportive principal convinced the superintendent and school board to reduce my teaching load by two classes;

the assistant director had hers reduced by one. At the time, our high school operated on a traditional seven-period day. The twelve student-editors and two faculty-directors staffed the writing center during thirty class periods a week. About one third of the faculty sent students to the center, and by the end of the year over 2,000 clients had visited.

Our handpicked group of writing center staffers represented a cross-section of the student body. However, these young people had one common trait: Other kids liked them. In addition, these student-editors, most of whom planned on attending college, enjoyed writing or realized why writing was important to their futures. Recognizing the need to show the maximum potential of a writing center, I selected these specific students in an effort to help the writing center gain status. Clearly, I was a political animal.

The second year of operation eighteen student-editors signed up for a special writing center English class, and by year three the staff numbered thirty-seven. The center opened at 7:30 a.m., thirty minutes before school began, and closed at 3:00 p.m., thirty minutes after school ended. We had our own room with twenty computers and two large desks for tutors and their clients. Amazingly, during our third year no faculty or adult staff members were on duty in the writing center during the day. A faculty colleague in the social studies department "supervised" from just across the hallway. He would pop in periodically, and I visited the center when time permitted. This student-supervised writing center lasted one year. A sixteen-year old knuckle-dragger threw a three-ring binder and a dictionary out the window in late May and that was the end of that. The next year teachers were assigned to the writing center as one of their duties.

During my last three years at the high school, the writing center thrived in the media center/library thanks to our gracious librarian, Mr. Sassi. At this time we were up to about sixty writing center staff members, most of whom took "The Writing Center" English class from me. Any real costs associated with running the center disappeared after the first year of operations because the assistant director and I returned to teaching a full load of classes. Operating eight hours a day, five days a week, 180 days a year, the writing center's annual client load swelled to 5,200 visits from high school students, elementary students, k-12 teachers and administrators, secretaries, custodians and "lunch ladies," school board members, superintendents, and community members. Here's a glimpse at a typical day:

> *It's 7:30 in the morning and two bleary-eyed 9th grade girls peek around the doorframe. Tabitha, the writing center student on duty, smiles. She figures the girls are from Mr. St. John's class–all of his students are writing multi-genre papers this month and must bring the papers in for a conference. At 7:38, Jeff and Lindy arrive to help with two more of Mr. St. John's students.*

Housed in the media center/library, the writing center creates lots of extra traffic, but Mr. Sassi, the media center specialist, loves the comings and goings. Most of all, he enjoys sneaking glimpses of kids working with kids.

During first period, Dustin swaggers in. The first draft of his reading autobiography is due on Friday–it's Wednesday. "I don't have a clue what to write," he moans. To get to know him, Marcy chats a bit with Dustin. Finally,

she suggests, “Let’s make a list of things that you’ve read in your life.” She helps him create a list, including snowboard magazines, comics, and a weekly magazine that has ads to sell everything; he’s also reminded of the picture books his mom read to him when he was younger. In fifteen minutes Dustin is on his way with a blueprint for the paper.

During 3rd period, three senior writing center staffers go to Mrs. Tyler’s class to confer with students during their writing workshop time. Mark staffs the writing center by himself, and except for a steady stream of kids coming in to use the computers, no one needs his help in the first hour. During the last thirty minutes of the period, he talks to three A.P. Biology students who are writing a brochure on Lyme disease for a group project.

At lunchtime fourteen students work at the computers while three student-editors, all seniors, sit around the main desk cramming for a physics test. A wiry boy fingering a paper peers in, sees the seniors, and bolts. “I’ll go get him,” says Jason, pushing aside his physics notes. Jason returns with the boy and spends ten minutes discussing the tenth-grader’s paper with him.

When the dismissal bell sounds at 2:25 pm, fifty-three kids make a beeline for the lecture hall. A fifteen-minute S.A.T. study session called “Slaying the Dragon” is being offered. Today, it’s sentence completions. By 3:00 in the afternoon when Ian tallies the writing center’s logbook, twenty-eight students have visited the center for conferences and seventy-seven have used the computers. The twenty-three kids in Mrs. Tyler’s 3rd period class and the S.A.T. crew are counted on separate tally sheets.

The writing center is closed for the day.

Teaching High School English with the Writing Center

During each eight-to-nine-week academic quarter throughout the school year, my high school English students created a portfolio that included the following:

> Formal Papers: Three highly revised papers, approximately 1,000 words each
> Informal Papers: Two papers, revised once, approximately 1,000 words each
> Journals: Forty-eight one-page journal entries, not revised, spell-checked only (if word processed), approximately 150 words each
> Reading: Five self-selected books and up to a dozen shorter in-class readings
> Presentations: Three to five book projects created and presented in class–one of these book projects had to be written
> Quarterly Reflection: A written reflection of the class and portfolio, approximately 1,000 words

The writing center staffers supported my English students’ work far beyond what I could have accomplished as a classroom teacher alone. Imagine the conversations surrounding the many drafts of my 120 students’ five papers each quarter. These students typically revised their formal papers three to five times, and though they only had to revise their informal papers once, many students opted to revise the informals more thoroughly for a higher assessment.

Ultimately, however, the writing center staffers provided the kind of ongoing support–eight hours a day, 180 days per year–that my students deserved. An added bonus: The writing center paralleled what was happening at the next level of schooling in colleges and universities.

The portfolio totals for 120 students during one academic quarter looked like this: Six hundred three-to-five-page papers could amount to 3,000 pages of final manuscript. Add in three to five revisions per paper and we're talking a lot of writing, a good deal of revision, and hours upon hours of conversations in the writing center. Could I have maintained this kind of support for my students as a classroom teacher without a writing center? To a degree. I could have devoted more time to in-class peer editing sessions, but because my students often utilized the writing center services during their study halls or at other times, they would have lost out on other opportunities in our classroom (e.g., discussions, reading time). I could have worked with teaching colleagues to have our students tutor one another, or I could have tried to solicit and train volunteers from our community to work with my students. Ultimately, however, the writing center staffers provided the kind of ongoing support–eight hours a day, 180 days per year–that my students deserved. An added bonus: The writing center paralleled what was happening at the next level of schooling in colleges and universities.

Over time, because of the highly individualized nature of a portfolio pedagogy and the support of the writing center, my high school English classes became more and more heterogeneously grouped (**Kent, 1997**). In a single class I might have students from each grade level, 9-12, and from all the different "tracks" (e.g., college bound, AP, special needs, vocational). I loved having a wide variety of students in each class–it gave the feel of a one-room schoolhouse, and the practice coincided with the National Council of Teachers of English guideline, **Tracked for Failure/Tracked for Success**.

Steps Toward Creating a Writing Center

My primary advice for new teachers interested in creating writing centers:

> --Mind the home fires: get your own classroom teaching practice in order.
> --Come to know your new colleagues, students, school, and community.

In the first few months while you're settling in at school, ask your mentor teacher and other colleagues if they have considered creating a writing center. As proxies for writing center services, your colleagues might conduct class-to-class writers' workshops or organize in-class writers' groups. Your school may also have National Honor Society or AP students providing tutorials. Clearly, it's important to know your school. Once you are convinced that your students and the school would benefit from a writing center, hold discussions with your English/language arts team about the concept. Your colleagues' support is vital.

Plan an introduction to writing centers at a team or department meeting using focus points such as the following:

> 1. Discuss college/university writing centers and your own experience.
>
> 2. Take your colleagues on a tour of selected writing center

websites:

International Writing Centers Association
Praxis: A Writing Center Journal
Benjamin Banneker Academy for Community Development
Glenbrook North High Writing Center
826 Valencia (Community Writing Center)
Purdue OWL

3. Share "The High School Writing Lab/Center: A Dialogue" by Speiser and Farrell in **The High School Writing Center: Establishing and Maintaining One** (Farrell, 1989, pp. 9—22). This conversation examines writing centers at the high school level.

4. Invite a university or 6th-12th grade writing center director to talk to your team.

5. Share the following statement from NCTE: **"The Concept of a Writing Center"** by Muriel Harris, a SLATE (Support for the Learning and Teaching of English) statement from NCTE.

6. Distribute the **"1987 National Council of Teachers of English Position Statement"** on Writing Centers.

7. Make a list of challenges your colleagues identify about developing a writing center. Examples of those challenges are cited at the beginning of this article. Discuss the list thoroughly. If you don't have all the answers, speak to your college writing center director, find a secondary writing center director to serve as a mentor, seek input through IWCA's **Discussion Forums**, join the secondary writing center director's **mailing list**, or **email me**.

Once you've introduced the idea to your colleagues, it's time to head off to the principal's office. Arrange a fifteen-minute meeting to introduce the idea, and, if possible, bring along a respected veteran colleague. By necessity, administrators have a different, more global view of your school. They will have many questions, including How much will it cost, Who will staff it, and Where will it be housed? You won't have all the answers; in fact, you won't even know all of the questions at this point. Offer an introduction to the idea by showcasing representative writing center books, articles, facts, and figures that you shared with your department colleagues.

My English teaching practice blossomed for two reasons associated with the writing center. First, the center's staff took over some of my work as an English teacher...Second, my students, in their daring and increasing confidence as writing center staffers, pushed me as their teacher.

You might place other informational pieces in a one-inch, three-ring binder with a concise (one-paragraph) opening statement. This professional presentation–similar to a view book or a marketing proposal–will do much to attract your busy principal. If at this point you have the support of your department, it might be a good idea to have a group statement, signed by all, at the front of the document, stating that you agree to explore the possibilities of a writing

center.

Once you've enticed your principal, make a list of other critical constituents. Those folks will include the school's literacy specialist or literacy coach and curriculum coordinator, the superintendent, potential university affiliations, potential business partners, and your school staff. The more partners you attract, the more potential the writing center has. Inform and include everyone.

How the Writing Center Changed My Teaching Practice and Me

After a few years of high school teaching, my six-class teaching load included three English classes designed for teaching writing center tutors. I couldn't have been more fortunate. The instruction my students received paralleled traditional training with university writing center tutors (Boquet, 2001; Gillespie & Lerner, 2003; Harris, 1986; and Kinkead & Harris, 1993). These days, as a university professor eight years removed from my high school position, hardly a week goes by that I don't hear from one of my high school writing center "kids," now carpenters, business people, mill workers, lawyers, woodsmen, Ph.D. candidates, ski coaches, actors, boat builders, learning center directors… and teachers–many teachers.

My English teaching practice blossomed for two reasons associated with the writing center. First, the center's staff took over some of my work as an English teacher. This shift in responsibility allowed me more time in school and at home to plan, write, and innovate. I also found much more time in class for those deeper conversations with kids. These conversations helped me think about students' needs and design activities that could connect more deeply to them.

Second, my students, in their daring and increasing confidence as writing center staffers, pushed me as their teacher. Their daring and confidence thrived, I believe, because of their work as "teachers" in our school's writing center. Unlike most high school students, these students enjoyed greater responsibility and authority through assisting our community's writers. You'll read statistics claiming that ninety percent of high school students' time is devoted to listening to teachers talk (e.g., Goodlad, 2004)–that reality changes when students work with students in a writing center.

My writing center students' confidence and abilities inspired me to create a wide variety of activities and opportunities, including fourth quarter independent study projects (**Kent, 2000**). My student colleagues craved an opportunity to explore interests in and beyond our English classroom. These interests were connected to language arts–reading, writing, speaking, and listening–and were developed as the students apprenticed in funeral homes and retail stores, explored mountaintops and city streets, etc. Indeed, their inquiry projects had these high school students building boats, writing plays, choreographing dances, studying Sylvia Plath, and escaping the cinderblock walls of school. I believe that such learner-centered opportunities became possible in our school because both my writing center students and I lived not only the writing life but also the teaching life.

Conclusion

During the spring of 2006, two of my UMaine interns and an English teacher (a former intern) founded a writing center at nearby Brewer High School. Folks from the school and community as well as television crews and newspaper reporters attended the grand opening. Housed in a room connected to the

library, the writing center looked a bit like a study room at Oxford. Talk about swanky.

The conditions for setting up the Brewer High School writing center were near perfect: A highly-respected English teacher who understood writing centers because he had used writing center services in college; two brilliant interns who had worked as university writing center tutors under the guidance of the quite wonderful Harvey Kail, coordinator of UMaine's **writing center**; an innovative, learner-centered principal who cleared the deck of any road blocks; a trained writing center staff of a dozen motivated high school students who loved writing; and me just up the turnpike providing information and advice when necessary. This fall, to complement what's already in place, my 4th-year English methods students will provide tutoring alongside the Brewer staff. If that's not enough, the high school has just hired two English teachers with writing center experience. Talk about ideal.

For those of you heading off to teach in secondary schools, let me repeat my advice: Settle in, get to know your new school community, and connect with college or secondary writing centers in your area. Are you eager to put your own writing center experience to use? Teach all of your students how to work with one another on their writing. Finally–vitally–stay connected to the writing center community by joining the **International Writing Centers Association**. Order writing center publications and continue reading ***Praxis***. The professional conversations within these publications and organizations will help your classroom teaching life in essential ways.

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‹ Consultant Spotlight up From the Editors: Beyond the University ›

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